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AUTHOR Matluck, Joseph H.
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ABSTRACT

The child brings to the classroom a socially conditioned way of behaving, both verbal and nonverbal, which reflects both the maturational process and sociocultural conditioning, and a socially conditioned view of what the norms of the dominant society are and what that society expects of him or her. The school attempts to transmit the cultural heritage in the form of certain basic social values and practices and in the "correct" usage of the national language. Teachers also bring to the classroom their own socially conditioned ways of behaving and a value system on which they interpret their role as teachers and the goals of the school, and they accept, reject or attempt to modify the behavior of the children. Thus there are three sets of rules in operation in a school setting, each in interaction with the other two. The communication problems that can occur in teaching and learning as a result of this interaction are magnified and made more complicated in the case of a multiethnic classroom. This paper identifies the purely crosscultural and linguistic factors that affect communication in this teaching-learning situation and illustrates them with specific examples from school settings containing large percentages of Chinese, Filipino, and Hispanic populations. (Author/CFM)

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CULTURAL NORMS AND CLASSROOM DISCOURSE: COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS IN THE MULTIETHNIC SCHOOL SETTING

Joseph H. Matluck
The University of Texas at Austin

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Three sets of behavior and discourse rules operate in a school setting--the school's, the teacher's, and the student's. Each of these three sets of rules are in constant interaction with the other two. And in bold relief at all times is the school's reflection and representation of the dominant socioeconomic segment of society. The communication problems that <u>can</u> occur in teaching and learning as a result of this interaction are magnified and made more complicated in the case of a multiethnic classroom, where the location of the school and the ethnic makeup of both student body and faculty are variables which greatly affect the nature and degree of the communication problems that <u>will</u> occur.

1. <u>The Child</u>. The child brings to the classroom (1) a socially conditioned way of behaving--both verbal and nonverbal--which reflects both the maturational process and sociocultural conditioning, and (2) a socially conditioned view of what the norms of the dominant society are and what that society expects of him. For him, classroom discourse proceeds only on the rules of behavior that he knows and has internalized.

As infants, children learn the language of their parents and of other significant adults in their environment. The speech community to which they belong modifies and influences their further language development as the child widens his contacts outside the home, usually at his entry into school or into early play groups. And since these school and/or preschool environments are usually populated by children of the same socioeconomic and cultural base--if we are talking about

the neighborhood school, as we usually are--then the linguistic patterns with which these children enter school will be roughly uniform.

2. The School. The school attempts to transmit the cultural heritage in the form of certain basic social values and practices and in the "correct" usage of the national language, sometimes confusing variable elements in the culture (e.g., preference of life style, bilingualism or bidialectalism, etc.) with the static elements of the culture (e.g., the role of the individual in society, personal dignity, etc.). In the traditional view, the school has the responsibility to transmit to the children (a) the basic social values of a democratic society, (b) its social practices (e.g., in the United States, the desirability of three meals a day), and (c) its language (i.e., the correct usage of the mother tongue--traditionally again, English).

With a maturing democratic society and in view of recent sociopolitical changes, there has been, of course, a great deal of rethinking and a reevaluation of what it is that constitutes a democratic social order, e.g., that every person in it (a) has equal rights, (b) has equal opportunity to participate in social decisions, and (c) is deserving of equal consideration for individual dignity.

3. The Teacher. The teacher also brings to the classroom her own socially conditioned ways of behaving and a value system on which (a) she interprets her role as a teacher and the goals of the school, and (b) she accepts, rejects or attempts to modify the behavior of the children. The rules of classroom discourse for her, however, reflect

not only her own social conditioning and value system, but also her perceptions of the goals of the school and, in addition, her insight into the possible deviation between her adult rules of discourse and those of the children.

The teacher, as well as the school, often tends to confuse some of the variable elements in the culture with static elements such as those based, ideally, on those fundamental social values and practices of this unique "hybrid" democratic society which we enumerated above.

Partly because of historical development and partly due to the socioeconomic nature of the teaching profession, educators have generally entered the profession deeply instilled personally--whether by birth into or by indoctrination--with values espoused by the largest segment of the society, i.e., the middle-class Anglo segment. This, of course, is fostered by the democratic process itself.

4. Interaction. Generally speaking, then, most of our schools, charged with the responsibility of preparing students to live successfully and productively in our unique democratic society, are populated (a) by teaching personnel who reflect the basic social values and language use of one segment of the society, and (b) by children representing the entire range of the social strata. Fewer educational problems arise when the social values and expectations of the school, teacher, and child match. Problems arise when a mismatch occurs, as it often does, in schools where school and teacher represent a different social class (not economic, since relative prosperity is not necessarily a determining factor) and espouse different social values

and practices and a different linguistic repertoire than those of the children in attendance. On another level, since much learning takes place outside the school--in the home, in play groups, and in religious agencies--conflicts arising between the school's teaching and these other learning activities often affect the school achievement of the children.

The literature is replete with examples of the sociological, psychological, economic, and political factors that affect teaching and learning, both in the communication act and in what is learned (Spolsky, 1977; Young, 1972; Gans, 1972; Nostrand, 1966; Havighurst, 1970; MacMillan, 1970; Kimball, 1974). Above and beyond those, however, we can identify further purely crosscultural and linguistic factors that affect communication in this teaching-learning situation. We would like to discuss these two factors and illustrate them with specific examples from school settings in Seattle, Washington containing large percentage of Chinese, Filipino, and Hispanic populations.

Linguistic Factors

Our schools and their teachers are certainly aware of many of the nonnative-English speaker's limitations in the purely linguistic area, since certain English structures remain as problems for these children well into the middle grades and beyond. Teachers need no great linguistic sophistication to see the obvious difficulties these children have with the unique number marking system of English nouns, pronouns, and verbs and the tense marking of English verbs, or their problems in making the necessary sex distinctions in the he/she subject pronouns.

They may or may not be aware of the degree of native-language influence involved (i.e., on the one hand, the morphological differences between L1 and L2 and on the other, the fact that no Asian language differentiates these pronouns, or that while Spanish does differentiate them, they are usually omitted, since the verb inflection already indicates the grammatical third person). Suprasegmental deviations from the standard-English norms (intonational, rhythmic, etc.) are also noted, albeit rather impressionistically, by most teachers. They may or may not recognize forms such as I have heat as syntactical influence of the native language rather than "idiomatic" expressions (a rather convenient and simplistic coverall for complicated structural differences) or I warm as being related to the nonuse of the copula in this type of structure in all Asian languages. They may ascribe to grammatical weakness alone a form such as Janet blouse (Janet's) as uttered by a Chinese-American, Filipino-American, or Mexican-American child and be unaware of the tremendous phonological problem inherent in the fact that these languages have almost no final consonants and not one single final cluster, and that the children are being asked to make a four-consonant cluster /-tsbl-/. Teachers could not be expected to know that the Chinese child who says She who? (Who is she?) is using a construction which is perfectly correct for Chinese word order (question-word at the end) or that that same child's trouble with interrogative When...? corresponds to the fact that his native language has lots of "time-when" expressions (What time...?) but no word for When...?. But how many teachers know (1) that a society's

language is a reflection of its culture, (2) that language differences are not simply a matter of direct substitution of one lexical item for another, of one so-called "idiom" for another, but rather that they represent radically different ways of looking at the same reality that we do, and of organizing their thoughts and ideas to interpret that reality, (3) that there are very intelligent societies with very sophisticated languages who start their sentences, not with the subject, but with the predicate; others who don't "pluralize" their nouns (number inflection); others who don't "conjugate" their verbs (inflection for tense); and still others who rarely or never use a copulative verb (such as be); and so on ad infinitum (Lado, 1957; Fromkin and Rodman, 1974; Ferguson, 1977; Cazden, John, and Hymes, 1972)?

And finally, how many teachers, when faced with children who exhibit these difficulties in the process of trying to learn English, avoid the value judgment of assuming that these children are, therefore, unintelligent, primitive, lazy, or unmotivated (Williams, 1970; Saville-Troike, 1976)?

Crosscultural and Sociolinguistic Factors

Purely linguistic problems are more readily identified and understood than are those relating to cultural factors and language use. We would, therefore, like to focus primarily on some of the crosscultural and sociolinguistic areas of the classroom situation in which the lack of understanding or misinterpretation in either direction results in a breakdown of communication between teacher and child or, as is often the case, between school and parent. This can be

illustrated by a number of examples of potential misunderstanding which we encountered in our work in the Seattle Schools:

1. Conflict. When a Filipino parent is asked to come to school and he either doesn't go or sends a family friend instead, the school (and teacher) may interpret this as disinterest or defiance, since the Anglo society's method of handling conflict is a direct one. For the Filipino, on the other hand, conflicts are not faced directly, but rather by indirect formulas as, in this case, the sending of a trusted emissary or intermediary.

2. "Shyness" among Chinese Students. The frequent reluctance of Chinese children to raise their hands in response to a teacher-to-group question is often interpreted as shyness or lack of self-confidence, when the child may simply be following the Lao-tzŭ "lead-from-behind" philosophy with which he was raised (Chan, 1963), which, in this case, would attach more prestige or glory to supplying the correct response only after others have erred.

3. Formulas - Hispanic. The teacher, perhaps slightly conversant with Spanish, visiting the Mexican-American parents' home to discuss some school-related business, arrives when the family is at the dinner table. When extended the usual formula of ¿Ud. gusta?, she either accepts or says No, gracias instead of gracefully and conventionally declining with another formula which says neither yes nor no, but simply Gracias, buen provecho (Thank you, hearty appetite). Of course, those parents, in turn, have either not yet learned the conventions of the dominant culture or prefer to maintain their own

within the confines of their home.

4. Formulas - Chinese. The teacher, attempting to welcome the little Chinese girl and extend the hand of friendship, compliments her on her pretty new dress, and is nonplussed at a response to the effect that "It's not as pretty as yours." The teacher may interpret the response as representing either lack of cooperation, self-confidence, or self-esteem, when the child may in reality be very proud of the dress and consider it the "prettiest of all," but for her to say that would simply not be the permissible formula in her culture.

5. Expletives and Taboos. The teacher, hearing the Hispanic child say My God! or By God!, or Jesus! may tend to type that child as sacrilegious when the child is merely transferring to English what for him are innocuous expressions used frequently and without irreverence by all levels of his native culture. School and teacher may also be somewhat disturbed by given names such as Jesus which are taboo in the Anglo culture in that context as well.

Another case in point is the Chinese child who learned to use God damn! when he lost a point on the playground and shocks the teacher by using the same expletive upon losing a point in a classroom game. He has not yet learned the contextual appropriateness of certain kinds of language. Monolingual English-speaking children, who know the language, can concentrate all their efforts on learning the rules of social usage, whereas the nonnative speaker is so busy learning all the linguistic structures of English that contextual appropriateness takes a back seat, as it were, in his learning priorities.

6. Teacher-student Relationships. Some teachers try to develop a certain nonaloofness with respect to the children in their classes, undoubtedly in an effort to establish a friendly atmosphere or possibly to have the student think of her as a "regular guy" or a "neat gal," only to find subsequent resentment and loss of respect on the part of her Asian students when she didn't live up to their expectations, since they have interpreted her nonaloofness as a sign of peer friendship--and, of course, no peer friend would ever give you a bad grade. The child, on the other hand, accustomed to aloofness in his culture on the part of teachers and school authorities, has misinterpreted the teacher's attitude and has yet to learn the parameters of that attitude.

7. Unfamiliar Conventions and Institutions. One of the best illustrations we know of the lack of teacher awareness of the possible differences in the conventions and institutions of other cultures occurred when we happened to witness a tutorial lesson in reading in a Title I school in Seattle when a nine-year-old Filipino boy, after repeatedly recognizing, from a list, all words beginning with the letter b except bathrobe, was told repeatedly by the teacher "You know, what you put on when you get up in th orning," in blissful ignorance of the fact (a) that few, if any, Filipinos of his socioeconomic status wear bathrobes, and (b) that even if they did, no male in that group would ever wear anything that resembled a dress.

8. Gestures. The literature is full of differences in kinesic and other nonverbal signals between one culture and another (Poyatos,

1976; Byers and Byers, 1972; Birdwhistell, 1972). To mention just a few: (a) the crooked finger gesture accompanying the spoken-or-unspoken phrase Come here, Bobby is considered obscene by the Chinese, as is the raised thumb for Hispanic speakers, the innocuous gesture used by hitchhikers on the road; (b) the hand gesture of waving good-bye (palm facing forward) as opposed to the one for "Come on over here" (palm facing backward) is completely the reverse for cultures in the Romance group; and (c) the arm-outstretched gesture with the palm face-down used by us to indicate the height of a small child is used in the Mexican culture only for the height of objects, while another is used for animals and still another for the height of children.

9. Some other Cultural Manifestations. In a previous article (Matluck and Mace-Matluck, 1975) we pointed out that a particular culture's view of reality may be quite different from another culture's interpretation of that same reality. There are so many of these in the daily life of the multicultural classroom (or any other multi-ethnic environment, for that matter) that it is most difficult, if not impossible, to imagine a teacher attempting to teach a limited-English-speaking child of even one ethnic group different from her own without a thorough understanding of at least some of the major cultural differences between English and that group. We will mention just a few of the crosscultural differences which we encountered: (a) policemen in Hong Kong wear short pants and carry the holster on the left side; (b) for children to be recognized as school children on their way to school, the Chinese (and other cultures as well) need to see, not

books in their hands, but a knapsack on their shoulders; (c) for a building to be recognized as a school building, it must have a fence for the Mandarin, a wall for the Filipino, and be a one-story building for the Cantonese; (d) a bed is an unfamiliar institution for certain cultures in which everybody sleeps on a mat; (e) animals are on a different level in some Hispanic cultures than they are in ours, there are no "S.P.C.A.'s," and it's not easy to imagine a boy "loving" a dog or cat; (f) Filipino dolls are not babies, but adult figures, since, in many ways, children are treated as adults--invited to adult affairs, learn adult dances (there are no children's dances), and are not even called "boys" and "girls" but "young men" or "young women"; (g) a birthday gift to a Chinese child is seldom anything expensive, but is traditionally a little red envelope with a token coin inside, and in most Catholic countries, gifts are not presented at Christmas but on the 6th of January (Reyes Magos or Epiphany); (g) a Mandarin cannot readily conceive of a mother cutting her daughter's hair, but a Cantonese can, and Filipino has a different verb for cutting hair than for ordinary cutting; (h) for a Chinese child there would be no connection of cause and effect--as there is for anyone familiar with U.S. schools--between a child crying with paintbrush in hand in front of an easel and a spilled can of paint on the floor, since our easel, our type of paints and our type of paintbrushes are unfamiliar to him; (i) in many cultures sandwiches, bread, cheese, and other such foods are unknown; meat is used very sparingly; and conventions at mealtime can be as different as night and day.

We have merely skimmed the surface of the many, many cultural differences which exist in any multiethnic school or community. The examples we have cited represent, for the most part, some of the more glaring crosscultural differences, as well as a few more subtle ones, and the gross differences are, of course, more readily noticed. But there are also a great many similarities across all human societies, and when these customs, behaviors, and institutions coincide almost perfectly, they need only small adjustments--both ways--in order to ensure understanding. And while it is true that the more subtle differences usually produce more problems than the gross ones and, if not recognized, may linger on and cause continued misunderstanding, nevertheless they are less easily detected without training. Thus it would seem most practical for teachers to be exposed at first to the gross differences in order to eventually arrive at an understanding of the more subtle ones. While it is not feasible nor even desirable to train all school personnel in a multiethnic community to become linguists, anthropologists, sociologists or ethnographers, it does seem rather urgent--in view of the fact that the monocultural classroom is fast ceasing to exist--that our teachers begin to receive meaningful training in basic ethnographic techniques, in the ways of gaining insight into another culture (Foley and White, 1977), so that they can acquire the necessary crosscultural understanding that can equip them to cope with the problems of the multiethnic classroom and the multiethnic community.

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